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INTEGRATION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SERVICES TO EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AS RETENTION TOOL FOR FIRST NATIONS: THE PRACTICE IN KIUNA INSTITUTE

CONTEXT

Inaugurated in 2011 and located in the Abenaki community of Odanak, the Kiuna Institute is a new college created by First Nations. Although it is intended for Aboriginal learners, it is open to all. The Aboriginal approach is favoured in all its areas of intervention. Recognized by the MÉESR, the college is under the responsibility of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), working closely with Dawson College and the Cégep de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

The Kiuna Institute has several objectives including the following:

- 1)** to provide quality education in an environment that showcases the culture and traditions of First Nations;
- 2)** increase access to post-secondary education as well as success and rate of graduation among youth and adults who enroll;
- 3)** make a step toward autonomy of First Nations educational institutions (FNEC 2010).

The Kiuna Institute offers quality college education that highlights Aboriginal culture and traditions in a bilingual home environment and completely adapted to its clientele. Its flagship Human Sciences—First Nations Stream program (300.B0) introduces students to different disciplines through culturally appropriate perspectives and contentS, preparing them adequately to undertake university studies.

In addition, the Kiuna Institute's educational project rests on three main directions:

- 1)** to form leaders that will contribute to social and economic development of their community;
- 2)** to enhance culture, identity and First Nations values;
- 3)** to improve access, retention and success of Aboriginal students in the context of post-secondary education (FNEC 2010).

In 2015, nearly 70 Aboriginal students from several First Nations communities of Quebec attended the Kiuna Institute. Some of them were parents currently conciliating family and studies. These students usually arrive with the desire to acquire the necessary tools to build a better future and with great determination to succeed despite the pitfalls.

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difficulties, absenteeism or presenteeism, anxiety symptoms, depression symptoms, interpersonal difficulties, domestic violence, substance dependence, suicide, isolation, etc. The diversity of these factors reflects the complexity of the challenges faced by being a First Nations student.

The development of the Kiuna Institute psychosocial counselling sector had to take account of this complex reality. In this sense, the need for a psychosocial service integrated to school considerations was rapidly established as was the importance of ensuring timely and accessible concerted interventions through the integration of psychosocial services to educational services.

In this integration of services perspective, the intervener's task definition represented a central element; from this derive the many opportunities for the intervener to be in contact with all members of staff on the front line. The role of psychosocial workers becomes critical in the coordination and provision of psychosocial interventions. This role requires availability and versatility on the intervener's part. The objective of this pivotal role is to facilitate the reference to psychosocial counselling service and, thereby, encourage greater accessibility to it. Ultimately, this system ensures that any student in need will have the chance to be adequately assisted.

One of the Kiuna Institute features is its tight school supervision. Indeed, educational consultants are not only in frequent contact with students; they also monitor the evolution of the current session and the overall schooling, allowing to target students who might benefit from psychosocial support in addition to educational monitoring.

Therefore, this organization enables customized student monitoring with an integrated understanding of both academic and psychosocial challenges.

The intervener is thus the therapist who offers psychotherapy essentially, but also acts in different situations involving psychosocial problems. First, he or she is the first responder in case of psychosocial crises, crises for which he or she has developed protocols in collaboration with the associate director. These relate to all crises possibly happening within the college as in the college residences. Meanwhile, bridges have also been created with surrounding resources (e.g.: hospitals, CSSS, the Abenaki police services, community organizations), since psychosocial crises with a more or less severe disorganization degree may have an impact on the overall college operations.

Indeed, given the close links between students, a psychosocial event at the college, as a community, can affect numerous students simultaneously to different degrees. Thus, protocols provide established and clear procedures in a case of a crisis and being able to contain it and respond appropriately and rapidly.

Another component of a psychosocial worker's task involves the role of consultant for teachers who request it. When they are concerned about a student, they can consult the intervener for courses of action to take to manage the situation, or for easy reference. Finally, the intervener's task definition implies participating in regular educational intervention meetings.

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CONCLUSION

Through the collaborative approach of the Kiuna team, the supervision available to students gives very positive results. If the psychosocial sector's high attendance rate can testify to the magnitude of the challenges confronting them (50% of students

This seems to stimulate them to invest in a therapeutic approach that combines personal development and psychological well-being to perseverance and academic success.

Finally, despite encouraging successes, challenges remain. The need to acquire more human resources remains acute. In this sense, the lack of adequate recurrent funding is the main obstacle to complete and customized services. In fact, justification of services to obtain funding must be done over again every year, despite the obvious needs. Each year, the sector is gaining visibility and, through word-of-mouth process, requests are increasing, which is a positive sign. Yet, it is currently impossible to meet all the requests (a waiting list has been created).

have already consulted the sector in 2014-2015), it also indicates the success of the sector's interventions. Of all those who consulted, none have left the college, although this option is real in most of the students who consult, particularly in the most difficult times.

It is important here to mention the personal resources that students have access to. Monitored students' attendance is impressive, as is their evolution in therapy. In addition to their young age, which is a facilitating factor in the therapeutic development, the main feature of those who do consult is undoubtedly the fact that they have a study project that allows them to have a glimpse at a better future.

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